

U.S. Embassy is surveillance target No. 1



The new U.S. Embassy is being built on a low, vulnerable site

Watchword for foreigners in Moscow: The walls have ears

Moscow
Relentless Soviet scrutiny of Nicholas Daniloff did not end when he moved from prison to the U.S. Embassy. The KGB can still watch and listen through an Orwellian surveillance net covering all Westerners—though none so stiflingly as those judged especially suspect.

At the American Embassy in Moscow, U.S. technicians ceaselessly search for electronic bugs planted in equipment and walls.

[For ultrasensitive conversations, the embassy has at least one windowless room that has been encased in a shell impenetrable to listening devices, sources in Washington say. Kept free of air-conditioning vents as an extra precaution, the room can be unbearably stuffy.]

U.S. diplomats once complained

In Soviet Union, a yellow license plate with K 004 identifies U.S. correspondent

that the KGB had sprinkled offices with "spy dust" to track people by telltale residue. On another occasion, the U.S. found devices in electronic typewriters that transmitted what was typed to receivers in nearby walls—and then to Soviet agents outside. Diplomats routinely protest the health threat from microwaves aimed at disrupting Soviet electronic surveillance.

The problems may worsen when the U.S. moves into a new embassy next year—thanks to a bad U.S.-Soviet deal made years ago. The site,

one of the lowest points in the city, is surrounded by tall buildings. This will make it harder for the embassy to eavesdrop on communications in Moscow, while making it easier for the Soviets to spy on the Americans. In contrast, a new U.S.S.R. Embassy in the U.S. sits on one of Washington's highest hills, again giving the Soviets the advantage.

As construction of a new American Embassy continues, listening devices are regularly discovered. Sources say steel bought from Soviet firms is riddled with devices implanted during casting. As a result, extra crews have flown in from the U.S. to finish the work.

The usual suspects in most bugging are the 200 Soviet citizens who work in the embassy and Leningrad consul general in low-level jobs. They could be fired—no Americans work in the Soviet Embassy in the United States. But replacing them with U.S. citizens has been ruled out, at least for now, as too costly.

Outside the embassy, most foreigners are housed in one of 20 buildings scattered around Moscow. Militiamen guard floodlit gates, ostensibly to protect occupants from crime but actually to discourage Soviet visitors and record Westerners' movements.

Tenants assume their apartments are bugged. And foreigners who try to evade scrutiny are easy to follow, since their cars bear distinctive plates—red for diplomats, yellow for business people and journalists. A yellow plate with a K and the numbers 004 means a U.S. reporter.

by Jeff Trimble